

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 17, 2009

Natalya Estemirova, a leading Chechen human rights activist, was kidnapped in Chechnya and murdered in Ingushetia on July 15. For ten years, Estemirova had fearlessly documented killings and kidnappings in Chechnya for "Memorial," a leading Russian human rights group. She had drawn the ire of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, a known human rights abuser, who reportedly threatened her in March 2008 after Ms. Estemirova had criticized a new law limiting religious freedoms by requiring women to wear head scarves in Chechnya.

"The United States must make clear that Moscow cannot ignore the consistent pattern of impunity for the killing of human rights defenders and others, including those who advocate for freedom of religion or belief in Russia," said Leonard Leo, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Over its ten-year history, USCIRF has monitored religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation, and for the first time in 2009 added Russia to its Watch List of countries with extremely problematic government policies. In its May 2009 Annual Report, USCIRF cited nine other high-profile murders linked to Chechnya which have occurred in the past year.

"Ramzan Kadyrov presides over Chechnya, where, according to numerous reports, his local militia engages with impunity in the abduction, disappearance, torture, and killing of civilians. USCIRF calls on the Obama Administration to urge President Medvedev to remove Kadyrov from office. After the murder of Ingush human rights activist Magomed Yevloyev last fall, President Medvedev replaced the governor of Ingushetia," added Mr. Leo.

The 2009 Annual Report chapter on the Russian Federation cited the following:

"The most frequent targets of such [violent] attacks seem to be those who bring Russian human rights violations to international attention, particularly to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), as well as government critics, particularly of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. For example, in January 2009, Moscow human rights lawyer Stanislav Merkelov was shot dead and Anastasiya Baburova, an intern for Novaya Gazeta, was mortally wounded near the Kremlin. President Medvedev did not issue an official statement denouncing these killings; instead, he held a private Kremlin meeting with the Novaya Gazeta editor and former President Mikhail Gorbachev nine days after the attacks, to express his sympathy. In February 2009, four ethnic Chechen suspects on trial for the 2006 murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya were acquitted for lack of evidence. In March 2009, the Ingush Prosecutor's Office launched an official 4-day probe into the 2008 killing of Ingush human rights activist Magomed Yevloyev, "accidentally" shot while in police custody. Also in March 2009, human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov was beaten in Moscow; his passport had been revoked one month earlier and he was charged with slander for his statements on Russian human-rights abuses. Moreover, at least six Chechen opposition leaders have been killed in the past six months, including Umar Izrailov, who had filed a case against Russia at the ECtHR and was shot dead in Vienna in January 2009."

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF

Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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